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Nation & World
Iraq's invisible man
A 'ghost' inmate's strange life behind bars
By Edward T. Pound

At a briefing last week, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was asked if there was a plan to hide a Middle Eastern terrorist, held secretly in a military jail in Iraq, from international Red Cross inspectors. Standing on the podium, he responded: "Not on my part." But a classified order, issued at his behest by the top military commander in Iraq, tells a different story: "Notification of the presence and or status of the detainee to the International Committee of the Red Cross, or any international or national aid organization, is prohibited pending further guidance."

The Pentagon and the CIA are the major players in the affair of the suspected terrorist known as "Triple X." Rumsfeld said he ordered that the man be held in secret, based on a request from CIA Director George Tenet. Triple X has been held in a guarded room at the High Value Detainee facility near Baghdad since November. In that time, his name was never entered in the official roster of detainees, meaning the Red Cross wouldn't have known he was there. The Geneva Conventions require the United States and other countries to give the Red Cross access to detainees, although restrictions are permissible for military reasons. Officials say the military is in the process of recording Triple X in the books. Rumsfeld says the prisoner "has been treated humanely."

The practice of hiding prisoners--so-called ghost detainees--was sharply criticized by Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba in a recent report detailing Army abuses of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad. He described it as "deceptive, contrary to Army doctrine, and in violation of international law."

"No altar boy." Triple X's status as a ghost was first disclosed by U.S. News. Pentagon and intelligence officials identified him as a high-ranking member of Ansar al-Islam, an Iraqi terrorist group with links to Abu Musab Zarqawi, who is believed to be responsible for beheading American Nicholas Berg and for attacks on coalition forces.

The CIA has declined to say why Tenet wanted Triple X kept off the books. An American

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intelligence official says the man--identified by other sources as Hiwa Abdul Rahman Rashul--was arrested by the Kurdish military last summer. For months, the CIA interrogated Rashul at an undisclosed location, officials say, and he provided information on Ansar al-Islam's structure and training. "This guy was no altar boy," the intelligence official says. The man, he adds, was involved in planning terrorist attacks in Iraq and elsewhere.

Rashul was returned to Iraq on October 29. On November 18, Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, the top U.S. commander in Iraq, issued a classified order directing guards with the 800th Military Police Brigade to hide Rashul. The order was coded "Flash Red," meaning, says one military source, that it was "hot." It says that Sanchez's command "accepts custody and detains Hiwa Abdul Rahman Rashul, a high-ranking Ansar al-Islam member." The order required extraordinary secrecy. Rashul's name could not be disclosed to the Red Cross or to a foreign government. It prohibited the Army from entering Rashul's name in any electronic prisoner database.

Other requirements of the order include:

Rashul will "remain segregated and isolated from the remainder of the detainee population. Under no circumstances will his presence be made known to the detainee population . . ."

"Only military personnel and debriefers will have access to the detainee. . . . Knowledge of the presence of this detainee will be strictly limited on a need-to-know basis."

"Any reports from interrogations or debriefings will contain only the minimum amount of source information . . . No source reference will be made to identify [Rashul's] status, membership in Ansar al-Islam, or other terrorist group."

Despite all this secrecy, Rashul has been interrogated only once--and then only briefly, a Pentagon official says. Even though her brigade was responsible for holding the man, Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski says, she's puzzled by the way he was handled. "It was bizarre," she says. "He had been there a long time, and nobody was coming to see him, interrogate him." At one point, she asked Sanchez's legal staff for guidance "on what to do with him." But when her deployment ended and she returned to the States in February, Karpinski says, "he was still sitting there."